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ABSTRACT

New technologically-oriented cartoons have been developed in the 1980s, and they may influence the attitudes and behaviors of their viewing audiences, who are comprised primarily of male children. A study analyzed "The Transformers" television program (a new robotic cartoon consisting of a mixture of violence, technology, space travel, and galactic adventure) specifically by examining the language, violence, and characters of the cartoon. The program was precipitated by two major forces: superhero cartoons and toy manufacture. The innovative toys, which can be manipulated to create various figures, contributed to the immense popularity of the program. To obtain information on children's perceptions of "The Transformers" television shows, 34 youngsters were asked to complete a questionnaire on the program and participate in an oral discussion about the cartoons, which they generally liked. At the same time, to analyze the program content, 37 college students rated "The Transformers" as to violence, characters, and language. Results indicated serious problems with the animated robotic adventure that included: inappropriate technical language, a complexity of evil lines, and a harsh way to portray a good moral. Although Transformer toys have given children a creative and modern puzzle form, the extension of "The Transformers" into a television series has negative associations for children. (Thirty-four references and one table are appended.) (MS)

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The Role of Language and Gender in The Transformers: An Analysis of Messages in Cartoons for Children

Joan E. Aitken

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Running Head: Transformer Cartoons

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to analyze The Transformers, as an example of the new technologically-oriented cartoon. A Transformer is a robot that can change from a human-like form to a vehicle or animal form. The research method included content analysis according to categories and questioning of children. The author found that The Transformers uses nearly all male characters, most of whom represent nonhuman life forms. Human adults are nearly nonexistent, and parents are portrayed in a minor or negative role. The language includes three unique characteristics: (a) a technical nature, (b) aggressive and degrading content, and (c) a complexity typical of a high reading level. The Transformers also contains physically violent acts, such as shootings and explosions. This study of The Transformers considers the potentially positive and negative influences that animated robotic adventures may have on children.

A relatively new type of cartoon has developed in the 1980's: adventure stories about robots. The animated stories about cyborgs and robots have included: Robotech, The Transformers, GoBots, Terrahawks, Super Saturday, Super Powers Team: Galactic Guardians, and Voltron, Defender of the Universe. Judging from the use of male characters in the cartoons and male children in the advertising to sell the toys portrayed in the cartoons, the animated robotic adventures are geared for an audience of male children. Between the toy industry and competition for viewers, children's cartoons have become an important area of competition (Woolery, 1983, pp. 41-43). Violence, technology, space travel and galactic adventure have contributed to the new robotic cartoons for children (Fischer, 1983, p. xiii). These cartoons may influence the attitudes and behaviors of their viewing audiences, who are comprised of primarily male children. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the characteristics of The Transformers as an example of the the animated robotic adventure, by examining language, violence, and characters. The method of research included content analysis of six The Transformers episodes and questioning of children.

Effects of Children's Television

Generations of parents have questioned the role that media has played in the lives of their children. Every parent has heard horror stories about behaviors prompted by

television, such as the instance when a child jumped off a four-story building with the belief that he would soar into the sky like a cartoon character. In another incident, a young boy hit his three-year old sister on the head with a chair because he saw a comparable technique used for revenge on his favorite cartoon. Many cartoons have contained violent incidents and stunts which some children have imitated (Kaye, 1974, p. 2). The concern of parents is well-founded because "children often demonstrate a remarkable ability to ignore the dangerous consequences of actions structured by keyings" which may be learned from media (Davis & Baran, 1981, p. 169).

Although the effects of children's television has been a subject of study for decades, we need more research. The continually changing television programs, cultural influences, and differences between children continually raise new question. As Davis and Baran (1981) wrote: "We do not fully know the effects of children's early exposure to various codes." (p. 67) According to Bower (1984), "researchers report that exposure to violent television programs is significantly related to current levels of aggression and future changes in aggression among girls...and boys in...the United States" (p. 190). Some people wonder if our entire society is at risk partially due to the influence of television on today's youth. There are several theories regarding the use of aggression in media.

The drive theory says that aggression is a natural human phenomenon. Frustration theory contends that people feel better when their frustration is vented aggressively. Some researchers (Fowles, 1982) have contended that television provides cathartic fantasies, to purge the viewer's violent inclinations. Recent research on the cathartic theory (viewing aggression released it from ones system so he or she will behave less aggressively) indicates that viewing violence fails to produce such a positive effect. (Davis and Baran, 1981, pp. 162-163). An independent study sponsored by the National Institute of Mental Health showed that the behavior of preschool children worsened when they viewed violent television programs and improved they viewed socially constructive television programs. Studies prepared for the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior found that children's cartoons were the most violent of all programs examined (Kaye, 1974, p. 62).

Simply the sheer amount of exposure to violence has concerned many parents. More than thirty years ago Wertham (1954), showed that one third of children's television programs contained violence or crime, a far greater proportion than adult television (p.370). One more recent study found that the average cartoon hour had nearly six times the violence rate of the average adult television drama hour (Kaye, 1974, p. 62). In another analysis, the

CBS network averaged 31 violent acts per hour in its cartoons, ABC averaged 21 violent acts per hour in its cartoons, and NBC averaged 19 violent acts per hour in its cartoons. Comparable prime time violence figures indicated far less violence for adults: CBS with 4.9 acts per hour, ABC with 5.1 acts per hour, and NBC with 7.5 acts per hour (Harrison, 1981, p. 129). Thus, the children's cartoons averaged three to six times more violence than adult programming. An even higher proportion of violence may be available through The Transformers which showed more than twenty acts of violence per half hour episode.

The statistics about the amount of television children watch continue to make the analysis of their viewing habits an important research topic. Children now watch nearly thirty hours of television each week, four hours more than children watched a decade earlier. America's youth continue to spend more time in front of their television tubes than their school teachers (Tooth, 1985, p. 65). Davis and Baran (1981) estimated an even higher viewing rate for preschoolers of over fifty-four hours of television per week, which amounts to nearly 65 percent of the child's waking hours, and some children average six to seven hours a day (p. 91-2). Rebel (1983) found that heavy television viewing increased children's anxiety. One might conclude that heavy viewing coupled with watching a program with heavy violence will increase children's anxiety even higher.

One may argue that an advantage to the nature of violence in the animated robotic adventure is that the interaction is between machines, rather than between people. Arguably, the more unrealistic the program, the less apt children identify with and emulate the characters. But as Becker (1983) explained: "The media, especially television, expose children to a wide variety of examples or models of behavior." He went on to say that television can provide models and a means of social comparison to "evaluate our opinions, abilities, and behaviors" (p. 406). Those various models provide a distortion of accepted societal norms, which has even greater implications when the child is confused about reality. Because evidence has indicated that young children think computers and other moving things are alive (Turkle, 1984), children also may consider the cartoons characters are alive and realistic. Children may be confused about the reality of robotic adventures, especially when one advertisement for transforming toys touts "Powertrons: They're alive." Collins (1981) wrote:

> The emerging evidence on cognitive processing strongly indicates that grade-school and pre-adolescent children construct representations of typical programs that vary considerably in how accurately and completely they reflect the content of portrayals; and their evaluations of the portrayed characters and actions

appear to vary concomitantly with their comprehension. (p. 333).

According to Harrison (1981), the concern was not that the cartoon violence was too realistic, but that the unrealistic violence gave a distorted view of the real danger of violence (p. 127). Certainly, logic indicates potentially negative effects on children who watch violent programming. As Bower (1984) explained about recent research:

> They find that, for boys, violence viewing has a greater effect on aggression if the child strongly identifies with violent television characters. For both sexes in the United States, aggression, academic problems, social unpopularity and violence viewing appear to feed on each other in a circular fashion. ...[T]he child most likely to be aggressive also watches violent programs most of the time they are on, believes these shows portray life just as it is, [and] frequently has aggressive fantasies." (p. 190)

Because adventure shows are designed particularly for boys, and because adventure shows have heavy violence, adventure shows have a unique influence. Singer and Singer (1981) found that boys who scored highest on imagination watched relatively few adventure shows. They also found that boys who watched few adventure shows were less apt to exhibit aggressive behavior.

As the field of television analysis has expanded to "become an academically respectable pursuit" (Gronbeck, 1983, p. 138), one can consider the analysis of children's programs an important step in analyzing the learning and acculturation of children. Rice and Wartella (1981) warned that researchers need to consider the entire viewing experience. We must consider the situation and child as unique: "the child who is interpreting television is an active participant in a dynamic communication of diverse messages that are coded in a number of ways" (p. 372). Thus one must be careful about drawing conclusions that are supposed to apply to all children. In a study of the arousal of emotions during television viewing, Dorr (1981) expressed concern over the relationship between children's understanding of television and its impact on feelings when she wrote that: "research into the relationship between understanding and impact is sorely needed" (p. 344). Newcomb (1986) contended that television criticism and empirical research can work together to better analyze television effects (p. 226). This paper incorporates a combination of a critical approach with empirical study.

Transformer Origins

Two major forces precipitated The Transformers television program: superhero cartoons and toy manufacture. The idea of transforming robots appeared unusual at first. If one looks at superhero cartoons, however--such as

Superman, Batman, Wonderwoman and others--one can see "normal" persons able to transform into fighting superhumans. From that tradition came the transforming robot. The recent popularity of Masters of the Universe and Dungeons and Dragons provided a base for complicated adventures. The new robotic adventure drew from several sources to provide a technological orientation to adventure.

Toys began the Transformer craze. Any adult who has personally examined a Transformer toy discovered an interesting, creative, and revolutionary toy-form. One might wonder who or what engineering genius invented the concept. The transforming toys have utilized characteristics of the long popular Matchbox-type vehicles, puzzles, and technology. Children can use the toys to interact with other children, create stories, and explore relationships. When one watches children playing with the toys, one can see children demonstrate creative thinking and problem-solving processes.

For those who advocate creativity, the toys have admirable qualities because they require the child to visualize it as something it is not. When the child looks at the robot, for example, he or she must be able to visualize it as an automobile in order to make the transformation. The Transformers are puzzles of sufficient difficulty that they challenge adults. Many are small, portable, and inexpensive toys. They are action toys,

requiring the child to move them and manipulate small parts, while being careful not to break pieces. They are thinking toys, requiring the child to reconceptualize the toy's form and work a puzzle. The parts and patterns used challenge children to use their hands and minds simultaneously, bringing a sense of accomplishment upon success. As one child explained: "What I like most is when it clicks when you put it together....I like to turn it into a robot." Although some parents can confidently purchase the Transformer toys as ones with high value for their children, others may question the way the cartoon counterparts suggest children should play with the toys. The toys' conversion to the animated robotic adventure cartoon has changed an exciting toy into a possible threat for children.

In recent years, several successful toys resulted in cartoons (e.g. The Cabbage Patch Kids and Pretty Pony). Once the Transformers caught the children's attention, several toy manufacturers produced similar toys, and various animated robotics adventure shows hit the television screen. The immense popularity of the toys caused a shortage in the 1984 Christmas season. For the 1985 Christmas season, one advertisement warned: "While supplies last." As one seven-year-old explained: "Everyone wants the big Transformers now. They are bigger and have more adventure."

A transforming toy can be changed from a robot to something else, such as an animal, motor vehicle, or other

machine. According to the advertising literature (Hasbro, 1985): "THE TRANSFORMERS. IT IS A WORLD TRANSFORMED. WHERE THINGS ARE NOT WHAT THEY SEEM. IT IS THE WORLD OF THE TRANSFORMERS...A WORLD OF HEROIC AUTOBOTS AND EVIL DECEPTICONS!" Now several manufacturers (Hasbro, Tonka, Select, and others) have produced similar toys. The J. C. Penney catalog (1985), for example, contained 66 transforming and 19 related toys. Hasbro (1985) showed their series of Transformer toys as able to convert to over 140 toys. The good guys proved more popular, as they manufactured 43 Heroic Autobots and only 29 Evil Decepticons. Children can own a wide variety of Transformer toys. Three examples of Transformers sold by J. C. Penney (1985) included: (a) a working camera that converted into a nonworking robot, (b) the Kronoform Diakron Multi-Force Robot that made "14 different Space Fighter vehicles," and (c) the $69.99 Voltron III Deluxe Lion Set in which 5 "powerful lion robots" combined "to become the awesome Voltron III."

When asked where Transformers came from, one boy responded with the name of a local store. "No, no," responded the interviewer, "where were they supposed to come from, another planet?" According to the Marvel series:

> Transformers are a race of living mechanical beings from the planet Cybertron. Four million years ago, a group of us comprised of two warring factions

> crash-landed on Earth. When we recently awoke I led my fellow Decepticons on a crusade to conquer this planet, enslave its inhabitants and seize its energy resources. (Carlin, 1986, p. 5).

Considering the popularity of Masters of the Universe and Dungeons and Dragons, with their complex story lines and infinite number of characters, a uniquely complicated science-fiction toy series was inevitable. Perhaps the fact that Transformers are nonhuman has made them more acceptable creatures: less like the horror of our past middle ages and more like a potentially helpful futuristic robot. In a sense, the toys may be realistic in the future.

Method

To obtain information on children's perceptions of The Transformer television shows, 34 children completed a questionnaire on program. After completing the questionnaire individually, the children participated in an oral discussion of The Transformers and other cartoons. The children were taken from two groups: a third grade public school class and an elementary after-school day care. The children were given 11 statements, to which they responded yes or no. In some cases, children responded both "yes" and "no" to indicate that both responses were correct. Table One gives a summary of the children's responses to the statements. A Chi-square was run on the results.

To analyze the program content, college students volunteered to rate The Transformers. Each person rated one of six episodes of The Transformers. Questions pertained to the categories of characters, violence, and language, and included counting, and answering closed-form and open-form questions.

Findings

Children. The first set of findings to be reported are from the questions directed to children. Two items shows a significant difference between the responses of boys and girls. Boys were better able to distinguish between good and evil Transformers (Chi-square of 6.80, at significance of level .01, Contingency Coefficient of .39, Cramer's Phi of .43). There are several indicators to enable a viewer to distinguish good from bad Transformers characters. It may be that boys watched the program and played with toys more, so they were better informed of differences. There are four basic ways to tell: color, symbols, voices, and behaviors. Color is one indicator, with "heroic autobots" being primarily red, blue, gold, and dark green. "Evil decepticons" are more apt to be yellow-green or purple. One can also tell between the two based on their symbols. When a boy was asked: "How do you tell the good guys from the bad guys?" he started drawing in the air with his finger. The child tried to explain the identification symbols--one of two masks--on the Transformer bodies. One can also make

some distinctions by listening to the difference in voices. A Darth-Vader-type voice is used for some evil robots. Higher pitched voices, Southern accents, youthful voices, and the pleasant vocal pitch and rate characterize the different good Transformers. The good Transformers exhibit more positive values and behaviors than the evil Transformers.

The second are of significant difference was that boys were more likely to attribute "power" to Transformers than were girls (Chi-square of 6.68, at a significance level of .Ø1, Contingency Coefficient of .42, Cramer's Phi Prime of .46).

The An four open-form questions gave insight into the children's perceptions. Some responses are included below by way of example.

A Transformer is like:

a. "a robot.'

b. "weird."

c. "a real dummy"

d. "a metal monster."

e. "people."

f. "Superman."

The thing I like about The Transformers show is:

a. "excitement and the way they transform.

b. "they fight a lot of time."

c. "I don't like it."

d. "it has great adventure."

e. "when my brothers are watching it, they can't bother me."

f. "the power."

g. "violence."

h. "they are colorful."

The thing I do not like about The Transformers show is:

a. "I like everything about the show."

b. "they transform too fast."

c. "I don't like the evil team."

d. "They kill robots."

e. "Nothing."

f. "It is stupid."

g. "When they fight, I'm afraid the good ones will get hurt."

h. "killing."

i. "when they die."

Tell about cartoons:

a. "The Transformers is the best cartoon you can see.

b. "Transformers are good for boys and I like it."

c. "Let your kid watch Transformers. They can watch it when moms are cooking and when they get home from school and on Saturday morning."

d. "I think everyone should watch them."

e. "I hate Transformers. They are for boys."

f. "They are fun."

Adults. The second set of data is from the college students. They found that the average characters per episode were 15 male characters and 1 female character, which included 15 nonhuman life forms, 14 adults, no children, and no parents. Some raters noted one child character and one or two parent characters. In one episode, for example, the parent was a spirit able to communicate to the child. In another episode there were two alien parents who were negatively portrayed as people who tried to destroy the good Transformers. One should exercise caution, however, in interpreting this analysis by adult raters who watched only one program. Most viewers come to know characters over time (Piccirillo, 1986), so one-time viewers may have a slanted perception of the program.

Regarding violence, raters indicated the following averages per episode: five physically violent acts from character to character, 11 shootings, and seven explosions, for an average of 23 violent acts per half hour show. Some raters found more than 40 violent acts in one half hour episode. Several raters reported excessive violence in the program. One rater, who was a parent, said that she had never seen the program before, but was upset by what she watched while completing the rating form. Her son regularly watches the program, but she said she had not realized how "violent," "harsh," and "deceptive" the program is.

Raters were asked to evaluate the use of language in the program. Some raters commented on the Transformer names. By way of example, some name of the heroic autobots include: Omega Supreme, Optimus Prime, Perceptor, Brawn, Cosmos, Inferno. Evil decepticon names include: Megatron, Bonecrusher, Venom, Thundercracker, Bombshell, Shrapnel, and Ravage.

Of the 37 raters, 33 were able to give examples of technical language, 37 gave examples of aggressive language, 33 gave examples of degrading language, and 32 gave examples of complex language.

Examples of technical language included:

a. "Spectro-galaxy analysis of rock."

b. "Astroid of organic nature."

c. "Immobilized program."

d. "Deprogram."

Examples of aggressive language included:

a. "Don't look scared moron, or I will have to destroy you."

b. "Eat my dust."

c. "I will have revenge."

d. "Blow them out of the sky."

Examples of degrading language included:

a. "We've seen the last of that sucker."

b. "You ugly tin can."

c. "Cowardly fools."

d. "I'd probably be a jerk too if I was made of junk."

e. "Vermin."

f. "Always give me surges."

g. "Suffering software."

Examples of complex language included:

a. "Warranty insurance."

b. "Static."

c. "Interrogation."

d. "New data indicates..."

e. "Complete analysis."

f. "Origin unknown."

g. "Just a shadow of my former self."

h. "Sprung a cog."

When asked the basic idea of the story line, four raters said they did not know. Many of the answers revolved around revenge, good robots versus bad robots, taking over territory, saving earth from invaders. Some examples of messages of the program included:

a. "Any means of protection available."

b. "If someone doesn't agree with you, shoot them."

c. "Revenge is useless."

Raters varied in the value they saw in the messages.

Most of the raters found the language to be unusually technical and complex. Some answers to the question "How do you think language was used in this program?" included:

a. "It was a bit complex, and had a tendency to repeat things."

b. "Half of the language, I couldn't understand what they were saying."

c. "The language seems to be complex in order to teach the children new words and meanings.

Regarding gender, some respondents commented that all characters were male, some said females were in subservient positions, and some said the robots were sexless. Some answers to the question "What interpretation did you make regarding the role of gender in this show?" included:

a. "The only second they had a female was when she served the men some food."

b. "The males were shown as competitive and violent. They didn't show the females enough to judge."

c. "Females disregarded as the lower class.

d. "Gender is irrelevant."

e. "The entire cast of characters was male."

f. "The males seemed to be genderless."

g. "Very chauvinistic males. Of the three women portrayed, only one was an autobot. The other two were waitresses."

The responses regarding an overall impression ranged from very positive to very negative. Some example responses included:

a. "While it was very entertaining it did not have any real purpose."

b. "I thought the show was too overpowering for kids, especially the mechanical, technical terms and names.

c. "During the action parts I really couldn't distinguish half of the characters from the surroundings."

d. "I personally thought it was a horrible show and a waste of a half hour."

e. "I didn't like it or understand it."

f. "Honestly, it is rather interesting and appeals to kids of all ages, although the vocabulary is rather complex."

g. "No one is killed on the cartoon, but it is highly violent."

h. "I think it was really great. Like all other stories it has a moral."

i. "I thought the program was too complex for children and the violence level was too much."

j. "Because these robots change into many different forms, it allows children to use their minds concerning what appears to be one thing could be something else."

k. "There are times when the show seemed over my head."

Discussion

Several specific attributes have characterized the animated robotic adventure cartoon: The Transformers. The

shows can be identified by: (a) transforming characters, (b) technology and robotics, (c) themes of violence, (d) orientation to a school-aged male child, (e) unusual language, and (f) the accompaniment of advertising to sell related toys.

The characters in the program The Transformers are robots which transform into different figures. In "The Ultimate Doom," for example, the "heroic autobots" transformed into cars, vans, trucks, and dinosaurs and the "evil decepticons" transformed into airplanes, cassette recorders, cassettes, watch dogs, buzzards, and weapons. Observation of children playing with the toys showed the primary challenge in transforming to the robots. Observation of The Transformers television episodes showed the reverse, with the transformation into vehicles and creatures being the unique appeal. When one child said the main thing he did not like about the television show was how fast they transformed, he may have hit on a significant idea. The toys appeal because of transformation to robots which take time and thought. The cartoons make the transformation so quickly that they fail to stimulate the child's curiosity. If the cartoons emphasized the transformation process rather than the violent themes, they may have a more positive appeal to children.

Robotic adventures contain characters and language involving robots and cyborgs. Key characters are human-like

machines, part-human cyborgs, or computer-generated equipment. Adults who watched the program complained that it was complicated and hard to follow. Some voices are distorted to sound mechanical and some of the ideas employed technological explanations. It is possible that time spent watching these cartoons may actually help children grasp technological ideas. The correct use of language and multiple syllable words serve as a strength of the program. In one episode, for example, magnetic power immobilized the computerized Transformers. Children who viewed that program may have learned at least one piece of information about computer technology.

The language of The Transformers is very advanced. Cartoon writers employed mechanical terms along with advanced technological language. Such terms as "body enamel," "circuits," "iron manifolds," and "discs" may teach children meaning by association. The program writers made associations through the names of robots. The names described or characterized each figure. Skywarp, Starscream, Thundercracker, Soundwave, and Cliffjumper were a few of the names used. Decepticons represented deception or evil, autobots represented vehicles, and dinobots represented dinosaurs.

Although cartoons have long held themes of good versus evil, these Transformer cartoons actually use the term of "evil" to clarify the distinction, as demonstrated by the

"Heroic Autobots" and "Evil Decepticons." The Transformers taught a moral at the end of each story.

When children watch cartoons, they may empathize with characters, particularly the heroes. In The Transformers, children identified most with the human boy who helped the Transformers. The good, brave hero always destroyed the evil forces in the end of The Transformer cartoons. The moral taught was "good guy wins over buy guy," but the moral was expressed in a destructive way. In one of the scenes, the decepticon leader struck down his comrade threatening to reduce him to "titanium fragments" if he ever "crossed" the powerful leader again. The program showed evil was bad, but presented the moral in an unusually harsh and violent way. Another scene showed the two evil leaders worked together to destroy the earth. Of course, the good autobots stopped the evil decepticons in the end, but the majority of the scene was composed of the evil ways one could deceive another. Deception, self-centeredness, destruction, and betrayal characterized the scenes of "The Ultimate Doom" episode of The Transformers cartoon ("The Ultimate Doom," 1985).

Based on the number of male characters in the program and the use of boys playing with Transformers in the advertising, The Transformers cartoon is designed for boys. Because the ratings services (Arbitron, 1986) do not provide estimate of male-female viewers in the children's categories, one can only speculate that the audience

contains more boys than girls based on the program and advertising content. Of The Transformers episodes analyzed, the only human character was a male youth. One girl said: "Boys probably play with Transformers more than girls, because they probably have more." Television writers have geared the animated robotic adventure, however, specifically to boys. The content, language, use of male characters, and male-oriented advertising appeal to boys. One may further assume, however, that younger children watch the programs with older brothers, and rely on them for interpretation of the action. One study that examined the interaction between siblings watching television (Alexander, Ryan & Munoz, 1984) indicated: "Analysis revealed the strongly interpretive nature of sibling interaction during television viewing" (p. 359). Older siblings explain and interpret the television action to younger brothers and sisters.

"Research studies have documented that female roles have held at 25 to 30 percent of all TV characterizations. Surprisingly, this percentage has been constant for thirty years!" (Reed, 1980, p. 350) In the Transformers cartoons it is approximately 15 males to one female. In the Smurf cartoons--more popular among female children than males, according to the children interviewed--the male-female ratio is more than 50 males to one female character. One must wonder how male and female children--as they learn about

gender--perceive the character roles in the cartoons they view.

The language used in names, titles, and dialogue is frequently complex and and harsh. One can find many specific examples of the technical language use, such as: "...disturb my cerebral-circuitry." (Carlin, 1986, p. 5). Slang sayings were used such as: "tall, dark, and gruesome;" "that should cook that turkey;" "laserbreath;" "parting is such sweet sorrow;" and "this robot still has a trump card to play." One might wonder how children appropriately relate to such slang.

To test the level of language, a segment from the beginning of one episode was analyzed to determine its reading grade-level. Using several indexes, the reading level ranged from tenth to twelfth grade reading level: Raygor indicated twelfth grade, Dunning Fog indicated tenth grade, and Flesche indicated eleventh grade. One must immediately wonder what effect the language level has for preschool and elementary children. One may argue that the show must be designed for high school and college viewers rather than young children. In fact, according to local Arbitron (1986) ratings, there were fewer adult (over age 17) viewers of The Transformers than many other children's cartoons.

The writers of the "Ultimate Doom" (1985) used strong lines, especially as spoken by the evil decepticons. One

line used by the decepticon leader was: "Silence you miserable flesh creature, you are to be the first of a new breed--a breed of slaves." A doctor said, "Creating a mindless slave is simplicity itself, thanks to the brilliant complexity of my hypno-chip." The hypno-chip was a special mechanism implanted in the human brain to hypnotize. The father, under hypnosis, told his son, "When next we meet, we are enemies" (The Ultimate Doom, 1985). This use of power appears inappropriate for young viewers. Fiske (1986) discussed the influence of the sense of powerless on the part of children (p. 205). Perhaps because children lack power they appreciate cartoon characters who exhibit great power. One might wonder if the size and power of a Transformer makes children feel small and insignificant. Researcher have considered whether or not superheroes have made children feel vulnerable. According to the portrayal in cartoons, the size of a human being is comparable to the size of a Transformer hand.

In addition to the concern for violence, many researchers have questioned the use of commercial advertisements among children's programs. Commercials send children three messages: (a) all problems are resolvable, (b) all problems are resolvable quickly, (c) all problems are resolvable quickly through technology (Postman, 1981, p. 44). In many ways, selling to children is unfair. People recognize children as less mature, less educated, and in

need of protection. Joan Ganz Cooney, president of the Children's Television Workshop explained:

> If we as a total society put the interest of our children first, then we are led to the inescapable conclusion that it is terribly wrong to be pitching products at the young. It is like shooting fish in a barrel. It is grotesquely unfair. (Kaye, 1974, p. 73)

To the television networks and stations, profits come first, and profits are gained through product sales. Broadcasters have found a build-in, presold audience for their new programs, a boast that has produced may hits. The toy manufacturers, in turn, have received exposure for their products with the help of series like "He-Man" which sold more than 70 million plastic figures in the last three years. One can easily understand why television broadcasters and toy manufacturers have such a close relationship (Waters and Uehling, 1985, p. 85). The toy manufacturers and producers of animated robotic adventures have worked together, as evidenced by the advertisement: "Challenge of the Gobots They're Awesome! Check Local TV Listings for Time and Station....Copyright 1985 Hanna-Barbera Productions, Inc. GoBots is a trademark of Tonka Corporation" (Kay, 1986, p. 7). Hanna-Barbera also cooperated with Hasbro to produce The Transformers. The only difference between a Transformer and a GoBot is the name of the manufacturer, and both has television shows

about the toys to sell their goods. Although the link between commercialism and programs has long been apparent, this blatant use of negative programming to sell toys is unique among the robotic adventure shows.

Over the years, research has proven that television violence can negatively affect children. Yet, many children's cartoons--the robotic adventures--thrive on violence. While one might expect the new transforming toys to fall by the way of many previous fads, but these new toys have ingenious characteristics that could make them popular over time. Just as the Barbie doll is a quarter of a century old, so might Transformers live for years to come. Whenever America's children involve themselves in a new phenomenon, investigation is warranted to determine the influence. Alexander, Ryan, and Munoz (1984) argued that the verbal interaction between television viewers creates the learning context. Thus, questions were included in this study which asked children if they watched cartoons with their parents and if they liked to talk to others while viewing cartoons. Of the children questioned, most viewed the cartoons without their parents, and preferred not to talk to others. One may assume that those children who view cartoons with their parents and who talk to others during the viewing have a broader perceptual framework in the viewing situation.

This study indicated serious problems with the animated robotic adventure that included: inappropriate technical language, a complexity of evil lines, and a harsh way to portray a good moral. Although Transformer toys have given children a creative and modern puzzle form, the extension of The Transformers into a television series has negative associations for children.

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TABLE ONE

Item	Boys-Yes	Girls-Yes	Boys-No	Girls-No
Have Watched Transformers	20	12	0	2
Have Seen Transformer Ads	19	11	1	3
Know good from evil Transformers	20	12	0	5
Cartoons are good for me	18	11	2	3
Parents watch cartoons with me	11	10	11	5
Okay for me to watch Transformers	19	12	0	2
Transformers is more for boys than girls	18	12	1	4
Transformers have power	19	9	0	4
I talk while watching cartoons	6	7	15	7
Transformers are like real life	13	7	12	10